



# FASHION FORWARD

Marvel's *Black Panther* is progressive, adventurous, and dripping with exotic tribal culture. Set in the fictional African nation of Wakanda, the film's costume designer, Ruth Carter, was set the challenge of creating the look for its technologically advanced warriors. Words Alesha Kolbe

**W**ith a prolific and diverse portfolio that includes *Selma*, *Keeping Up with the Joneses*, and *Marshall*, Ruth Carter is no stranger to the art of costume design. However, that wasn't always where her career was headed.

"I was a professional education major at Hampton University," she tells *STACK*. "I was about halfway through my undergrad studies, and I decided I wanted to go into theatre. I had one audition for a play; I didn't make it, but the instructor asked me if I'd like to do the costumes for the play. I did, and it stuck like glue."

In Marvel's *Black Panther*, the tribes of Wakanda each have their own unique flavour, and Carter wanted to draw influence from all over the African continent to ensure the movie and its people felt authentic.

"Wakanda was based off of all of Africa. The entire continent; South Africa, North Africa, East and West. It was taken from an anthropological point of view. The ancient Indigenous tribes of Africa were the inspiration, but we didn't stop there, because Wakanda is a forward-thinking community. They're much further ahead than we are today, and they're very modern. Using



Ruth Carter

## WAKANDA FOREVER

"There was a manual that was outlined for me that the production designer – Hannah Beachler – put together. It was a 500-page manual of where Wakanda came from, how their culture got started. It was nice to read what Wakanda was, or what Wakanda is, and we used that guide along with the cast to gauge where we could take inspiration from."

the Indigenous cultures around Africa was a way for us to keep the culture of who the Wakandan people are, and really define their look.

"A lot of the tribes wear beautiful headwear, and wraps, and silver jewellery, and other tribes wear neck rings and arm bands, and a few have blankets, so we





### DID YOU KNOW?

The neck rings worn by Danaï Gurira as Okoye were patterned after the neck rings worn by the women of the Ndebele tribe. For shooting purposes, however, they were remade in rubber.

used all of these elements and modernised them so that Wakanda could be a place in Africa that has both ancient history and modern Afro-futurism in their look."

If you've seen *Black Panther* – and you certainly should have by now – you'll notice how elaborate and intricate the costumes are; especially the Dora Milaje, the region's own secret service. Carter tells us theirs were some of the more complicated costumes to fashion.

"It's between the Jabari Tribe and the Dora Milaje. The Dora have the red colour and the bead work; if you go to Africa, you'll see a lot of bead work, and bead work always has a story. There is a leather harness that they wear that is hand-sewn together – that is a process that's taken from South Africa. They even share neck rings with some of the other tribes. There were several elements to the Dora Milaje costume that make the uniform a royal, honourable garment."

However, the costume designer notes that the Jabari were difficult in their own unique way. "The Jabari were based on a Northern African tribe of astronomers. This tribe has a ceremony where they would put these grass skirts on and adorn these incredible wooden masks.

The Jabari in the Wakandan story were a tribe that decided to agree to disagree and moved into the hillside, where they used spears and swords and didn't use Vibranium weapons. They lived in the mountains and had to use fur to keep themselves warm, and we also gave them the grass skirts of the Northern African tribe, but ours had to be like a warrior would wear. It wasn't the bright colour of the ceremonial skirts, it was more muted and dark, and I put a leather sheath underneath it too."

T'Challa's sister Shuri – played by the wonderful Letitia Wright – is very fashion-forward for her age. Carter wanted to make sure her costume was both fashionable and functional for her work in the lab.


"Letitia was working really hard as we were designing her costume for the lab. She let us know her character right from the very beginning when she's at the Warrior Falls in her beaded costume, and she's like, 'C'mon people – this corset is very uncomfortable'. You get it right away that she's very uncomfortable with all the traditional beading and things you have to wear.

"I wanted her person to feel very forward-thinking. I wanted her to have a lab costume that looks like it would be protective but also stylish. So she wears a lot of overlays. Everything she wears is overlayed, whether it's a sweatshirt kind of thing, or something else. I didn't want it to look like a lab coat, because I think people have tried to recreate the lab coat too many times. I wanted to communicate with her clothes that she's using recycled materials. That she could be fresh and young and stylish, and still very Wakandan."

Special attention, too, was paid to Michael B. Jordan's character, Killmonger, and his significance both in the plot but also in the subtle social commentary of the film.

"He came from a lost tribe, and represented the African-Americans. There are so many metaphors to his character, you can go in so many directions, but it was really important that he represent any black man in America. There was a lot of anger in his costume. His black jacket was custom made, and he was very meticulous about all the elements in his costumes when he first came in. He deliberately looks like an urban guy who's just walking around a museum looking pretty out of place – a bit of a fish out of water."

Finally, for Carter, it was important to her to be able to play a role in such a pivotal moment in the history of cinema.

"I feel like I've closed a chapter of my career," she says. "That even though I will continue to make movies as a costume designer, I feel like I have kind of corked the bottle in a sense that I feel the satisfaction of having done so many aspects of black history, that I've had so much to do with people who want to do what I do and have the same level of passion about black history and civil rights and superheroes. I feel very satisfied. It's satisfying to know people love what you do." 

• *Black Panther* is out now



## WINSTON DUKE on joining the MCU in *Black Panther*

**We caught up with the towering actor at San Diego Comic-Con, and this gentle giant couldn't be happier with the warm reception he's been given.**

"It's very reminiscent of the treatment I've been getting from this culture overall," he tells *STACK*. "From the first day I found out that I got this role, everyone's been really receptive and welcoming me into this beautiful family."

Best known for his role on TV's *Person of Interest*, Duke was cast as a rival to T'Challa/Black Panther in the Marvel film.

"I play M'Baku, leader of the Jabari tribe, who don't believe that Vibranium is the best thing for the country and have removed themselves from the mainstream culture," he explains. "My character is deeply loyal to his people and deeply faith-driven, and as a result that puts him at odds with T'Challa and his father before him."

When it came to getting a feel for the character, Duke had help from his friendly neighbourhood comic guy.

"He pulled out every time M'Baku appeared in the comic books and put them on the table and said, 'Here, read these.' So I'm deeply familiar with how he's represented in the comics, and that's pleasant."

Words Scott Hocking

